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Stalin's sad daughter

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Svetlana Alliluyeva, daughter of Josef Stalin, is still unhappy. She originally defected from the Soviet Union in 1967, causing considerable embarrassment to the political heirs of her infamous father. Dwelling first in the United States and then in the more sequestered setting of Cambridge, England, she became the author of two books about her tortured existence as the child of the mass murderer who ruled Russia for 30 years.

When she returned to her motherland in 1984, embarrassing her capitalist hosts, she explained her motives as private and literary. She wanted to be reunited with the children she had left behind in Russia, she was fed up with the CIA's editing of her manuscripts and exasperated by the practices of commercial publishers in the West.

Now that she has visited US diplomats in Moscow to inquire about a second defection, her plight once more appears as a political problem on both sides of the rusting iron curtain. She has become an ironic paradigm of all those disenchanted individuals – and all those writers – who were used and abused by the political demons of the twentieth century.

Her father, who killed more communists than all the capitalist powers combined, was also notorious for censoring, silencing and exterminating writers. Some poets, playwrights and story tellers tried for a while to harness their muse to the tyrant's cart. Most of them were crushed under the wheels of power; the lucky ones were merely injured politically, and survived. Alliluyeva is the last of that legion of writers who were cursed by their filial bond to Stalin. The only one related by blood, she flits from East to West like a restive spirit in purgatory, a living allegory for all her literary brothers and sisters.

What is to be done for her? What is she to do?

One answer was given a half century ago by Boris Pasternak, the poet and translator of Shakespeare who is known in the West as the author of "Dr. Zhivago."

In June 1935, just a few days before the opening in Paris of an International Writers' Conference in Defense of Culture, the Soviet embassy informed a principal organizer of the conference, Andre Malraux, that the foremost Russian writer of the day, Maxim Gorki, would not attend. Malraux went to Andre Gide and asked the novelist to lend his name to a request that the Soviets send Pasternak and Isaac Babel in Gorki's stead. As Herbert Lottman explains in his book, "The Left Bank," Malraux had no way of knowing that "in the last years of his life Gorki was virtually a prisoner of Stalin, who would not allow him to leave the Soviet Union."

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The request was made, and shortly thereafter Pasternak received a phone call from the Kremlin. The poet was told "that Josef Stalin himself was ordering him to purchase Western-style clothing and to board a train that very night for France."

What Pasternak said when he finally appeared at the podium in Paris was not what his master in Moscow wanted him to say, and certainly not what the assembled true believers and fellow travelers expected to hear from Stalin's envoy.

As recalled by Malraux, Pasternak said: "Talk politics? Futile, futile... Politics? Go country, friends, go country pick flowers."

Pasternak's peculiar advice, the stubborn wisdom of a poet who knew he could not sing with a bit and bridle fastened to his mouth, remains as appropriate now as it was in the low, dishonest decade of the thirties.

The political inheritors of Stalin should let his daughter go. And when she arrives in the free world, no spymaster should try to tell her what to write, what to say. Like the rest of humanity, she deserves a respite from all the political forms of patriachal authority. Like everyone else, Stalin's daughter should be free to go to the country and pick flowers.

Alan Berger is a member of the Globe staff.